

Joseph Caruso  
[REDACTED]

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May 1, 2019

The Honorable Anna J. Brown  
United States Senior District Court Judge  
Mark O. Hatfield United States Courthouse  
Room 1407  
1000 Southwest Third Avenue  
Portland, OR 97204-2944

Dear Judge Brown,

I stand before you humiliated and heartbroken. I knowingly imported fentanyl from China then distributed it to vulnerable addicts across the country. One of those addicts died after injecting the fentanyl I mailed to him. When federal agents told me that my packaging was discovered in that young man's bedroom, I was overwhelmed with grief and shame.

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid used legally for pain and anesthesia. It is also abused recreationally and by drug addicts. Due to the extremely high strength of pure fentanyl powder, it is very dangerous. In recent years, fentanyl became the drug involved in the most American overdose deaths. I am lucky that I did not die when I injected fentanyl into my own body.

I abused, imported, and distributed fentanyl. My actions were immoral, reprehensible, and criminal. I am completely responsible for my own choices. There is no excuse for my conduct. My period of atonement will last for many years. I am guilty.

Your Honor, I am grateful for this orderly process to reckon with the truth. My actions had serious consequences for many people. Every day, I think about that family in Wisconsin. I am haunted by that young man's death. I am so sorry that I sent him that packet of fentanyl. His parents will be in my thoughts for the rest of my life.

Soon I will accept my punishment. Knowing that justice will be done, I am focused on how I got here and what went wrong. Since my arrest, I have been blessed with seventeen months of continuous sobriety. This time gave me the chance to reflect on what happened. This letter is my way to put these criminal actions in the context of my whole life.

## **Family Background**

I was born in Kingston, Pennsylvania on August 23, 1984. My parents are still married and I have no siblings. Both of my parents are from large Italian Catholic families and neither of them attended college. When I was a child, we lived in the small mountain town of Dallas, Pennsylvania (pop. 2804).

My father grew up as one of 11 siblings. He came from a home that was always loud and chaotic, with the family business being operated out of the home, and the warehouse right next door. His father's temperament was known as loud and aggressive throughout the entire family. When I was a child, my father was an active heroin addict. I still have memories of extreme conflict in my house. I remember my mother crying as my dad pounded on the locked front door.

At age 30, my dad got sober from heroin and other substances after years of addiction. I was five years-old at the time and am grateful that he found the path to recovery. Twenty-eight years later, my father is still sober and physically active, and still participates in AA, helping others stay sober.

My father inherited part of his family's moving business. I was in third grade when he sold his share and moved us to Las Vegas, Nevada. Six months later, we moved to Phoenix. One year later, we moved to San Diego, and then on to Tampa.

In each new city, I went to new schools. My mother found employment, mostly in non-profit organizations. My father found a wide variety of jobs along the way. For example, he worked as a mover, a janitor, and a dishwasher. We lived modestly but securely. My material needs were met, and we always lived in safe neighborhoods.

Like his father, my dad could lose his temper in a flash over minor provocations. I walked on eggshells in fear of his explosive rage. My mother and I never knew when his anger would erupt. When the two of them battled, they often drew me into the middle as a pawn and a weapon.

With all the geographic disruptions, I focused my energy on solo activities like BMX biking, surfing, and skateboarding. My father was a long-distance runner and fitness enthusiast. My father craved freedom and novelty at all times. After years of addiction, he fled from anything that tied him up or brought him down. We lived like nomads after my father sold out of the family business, exploring new areas of the country. Each day was a new adventure. My father's work ethic counterbalanced his impulsive, free spirit. I remember many times when he took me to a moving job that lasted all day long. Even now at age fifty-eight, he still moves household goods now and then. He'll work twelve hours then get up the next day and run ten miles. I admire my dad's determination, focus, and hard work.

### **Early Drug Use and Education**

By the time we settled in Tampa, I had developed solitary social habits. I adapted to life on the margins and fended for myself. I was most comfortable around other marginal kids and found common ground with the skateboarders. Looking back, I see how the instability of my home life contributed to my outcast attitudes.

I started smoking marijuana in eighth grade. During high school, I smoked pot daily and also abused cocaine, ecstasy, and benzodiazepines. I could not focus in class and received poor grades. I held down a part-time job at Subway, but was frequently high at work.

In eleventh grade, I sold B12 vitamins to someone in an internet chatroom who was looking for ecstasy tablets. This person turned out to be a police officer. I pled guilty to the sale of a counterfeit substance, a juvenile felony. This conviction served as a wake-up call. My parents came down on me hard. It was the end of my junior year and I was failing out of school. My drug use had completely overtaken my life.

During senior year, I buckled down. I was able to pay attention in class so my grades improved. I took a full-time job at a high-end, waterfront restaurant called Bon Appetit. I worked hard and was able to save money. Thankfully, I inherited my mother's warm, gentle demeanor. I also could focus and work hard like my dad. When I'm on the right track, I make good things happen.

After graduation, I enrolled in St. Petersburg College. As a result of my adolescent drug abuse, I was academically behind. Now focused and motivated, I made up ground quickly. I used my savings to spend a semester traveling through Europe. By the time I earned my Associate's Degree, I decided to pursue a career in teaching.

In 2007, I moved out to Portland, Oregon, with my girlfriend. For the first year, I worked at a Sherwin-Williams Paint Store and joined a mountaineering club called Mazamas. Portland was a perfect place for me to explore the outdoors. I could take road trips to the coast, through the mountains, or to the high desert. My girlfriend, Jen, and I would go backpacking for days at a time.

In 2008, I enrolled at Portland State University where I earned a bachelor's in social science with a minor in Native American Studies. My goal was to become a school teacher. I completed teaching internships at Ockley Green Middle School and the Albina Alternative Youth School. I wanted to be of service to underprivileged students. While at school, I continued to work full time as a food deliveryman for S.P. Provisions.

### **Opioid Addiction**

While climbing Mount Defiance in 2008, I seriously injured my shoulder. I slipped while gripping an ice axe with my right hand. For four hours, I laid in the snow as six people tried to pop my

shoulder back into place. It took me six hours to crawl down the mountain and get to the hospital.

After my shoulder surgery, I was prescribed OxyContin, an opioid tablet containing oxycodone. I quickly became dependent on OxyContin. When I ran out of my prescription, I found a way to obtain 80mg oxycodone tablets on the black market. I took opioids for approximately six months for pain. Then I began to use opioids recreationally on a weekly basis.

Even taking opioids multiple times a week, I continued to function. I earned a place on the Dean's List at PSU. I kept my job. I even ran the Hood to Coast Relay Race. I justified my drug use by telling myself that taking opioids after work was like having a martini. It was my "me-time."

Soon after I graduated, my opioid dealer lost his connection for the prescription tablets. He taught me how to smoke black tar heroin on a foil. I preferred the opioid tablets, but the black tar heroin was cheaper. Around this time, I lost my motivation to become a teacher.

Instead of pursuing my master's degree, I took a dispatcher job at the All My Sons moving company. I continued to smoke heroin twice a week and on weekends. I thought of it like alcohol and resented the social stigma attached to my drug of choice. The more I used, the more I kept it a secret.

On the surface, I was functioning. I held down my job. I took weekend trips with my parents, who had moved to Portland. My girlfriend, Jen, did not use drugs and had adopted my casual attitude towards my own use. Deep in denial, I saw little harm in smoking black tar heroin.

Soon, the consequences started to arrive. I stopped running, rock climbing, and backpacking. I stopped buying and reading books. I used heroin on a daily basis. I developed multiple sources for heroin. I started injecting heroin into my veins. I started experiencing physical withdrawals like restless legs, lower back pain, and nausea. I could not sleep without using heroin. I took it on vacation with me. I snuck out in the middle of the night to use. All my extra money was going towards the purchase of heroin.

In 2013, Jen announced she was pregnant. The thought of having a child overwhelmed me. I could hardly take care of myself. We considered an abortion but could not go through with it. My life had become totally unmanageable. If I could go back in time, I would do anything in my power to guide myself to rehab before my son was born.

I confessed my drug problem to my boss at All My Sons Moving and asked for help. Instead of getting help I was asked to leave my job. My shame grew deeper. Lile International—a relocation, logistics, and warehousing company—hired me to be an operations manager. Soon, I had 150 workers reporting to me on large accounts like Nike and the Residence Inn by Marriott Portland Downtown. I worked hard and completed many large, complex projects.



## **Chaos and Cryptocurrency**

On May 5, 2014, my son, [REDACTED], arrived. On the day he was born, I used heroin and crack cocaine. While at work, I remember feeling dope-sick in meetings and wearing long sleeves to hide the scars on my arms. I would wake up every morning with withdrawal symptoms. Sometimes, I would sneak out in the middle of the night to get high.

The consequences kept getting more severe. I was arrested for felony heroin possession. Later, I lost my job when the arrest appeared on a routine background check. I got into a serious car accident. Once, I went on a trip to Yosemite National Park with my father. There, in the most beautiful place on Earth, I covertly shot up heroin in my tent.

In 2016, my wife found me passed out when I should have been watching my son. I love [REDACTED] and treasured each minute that we spent together. However, I put my addiction before everything and everyone else. Jen made the wise decision to leave me behind. She took our son and moved in with her parents.

Now home alone and unemployed, I opened the gates of hell. I would stay awake for days at a time using large amounts of opioids and cocaine. Soon, I discovered how to order the drugs on the internet. Alone in my apartment, I consumed gluttonous quantities of drugs that arrived in the mailbox along with the bills and catalogues.

Then I learned how to trade cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin. Instantly, I was lost in the dark recesses of the internet looking for drugs and transacting in exotic digital assets. I came up with a strategic system and started making large profits in legal cryptocurrency trading. I had never seen money like this before.

I remember buying a new Audi and flying to Hawaii on a whim. Once I went skydiving while high on cocaine. I lived my life in zero-gravity, floating alone in a distant drug-addled orbit. I followed each impulse and took every adventure.

## **Fentanyl and Crime**

My final divorce agreement included strict terms governing visits. I had to pass urinalysis in order to see my son. To get around this obstacle, I started using fentanyl instead of heroin. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid and could not be detected by urinalysis. Fentanyl was the simple, obvious solution to that problem.

Around the same time, I started abusing Xanax, a benzodiazepine. No matter how big the disaster, Xanax silenced my internal alarms. Most days, I had no human interaction at all. Totally isolated, there was no external check on my behavior. Without a job, I began selling a portion of the fentanyl I put into my veins every day. Distributing fentanyl is a very serious crime. I knew what I was doing was wrong. I wanted to stop. On many occasions I threw my digital devices in the trash and vowed to stop ordering and distributing fentanyl over the internet. Every time the panic of withdrawal set in I went back to buying and selling fentanyl.

Usually I sold quantities of 0.1 grams. The most I ever sent was one gram. The amount does not matter. Fentanyl can be deadly. One mailed envelope arrived in Wisconsin. On his twenty-second birthday, the recipient used that fentanyl and died. Whether it was a suicide or not, it was my fentanyl that killed that man. If any of my packages had burst apart, the fentanyl would have posed a terrible safety risk to innocent people. I can hardly believe how reckless and blind I was. It's devastating to think that was me.

On November 21, 2017, I was arrested by federal agents. I went through withdrawals in jail. I have not seen my son, [REDACTED], since that day. I voluntarily submitted to questioning. I was relieved to tell on myself. I deserve to be punished for my crimes.

### **Looking Ahead**

My sobriety date is November 30, 2017. I attend twelve-step meetings 3-6 times per week. I have a sponsor and am working the steps. Step Four is to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of my life. This narrative is part of my reckoning with the truth.

Today, I have a part-time job as a warehouse manager at Pelzner Golf Supplies and I have a great relationship with my supervisor and owner of the business. I volunteer at the Blanchet House serving meals to my homeless neighbors. I started volunteering in July 2018 and I've been going an average of four times a month ever since. I had never volunteered before and didn't realize how healing this kind of work is. I've watched people come in with drug addiction issues, heal and put their lives back together. One man went from being homeless and addicted to becoming a staff member at the organization. I enjoy connecting with people like him, as it inspires and motivates me to stay the course. I see volunteering as an important part of my recovery.

Shortly after I was released on pretrial, I joined an AA group. Until then, I had never been part of the AA program and it has changed my life. I have worked all of the steps with my sponsor, and it was the first time that I was able to look at all of my character defects to understand why I made poor choices. I have learned to take responsibility for my actions without blaming others. I have learned how to be completely honest with myself and with others about my mistakes. All this has helped me to release the guilt and shame I've carried most of my life. The freedom and support I have found in the AA program has taught me how to be vulnerable and honest with others, how to empathize with others and recognize that I am not alone. With AA, I have a safe place I can go to have healthy relationships with other people who have been through the same things and who show by their actions and examples, that being sober is possible. Because of the AA program, I now have a support group of people I can call at any time of the day to talk about any problem that I am having. This has become my community, a group of people who are truly there for one another. I also have an incredible sponsor named Lou who has been by my side since the first week of my sobriety. With his help I've learned to be of service to others in the program. The AA program is a life-long commitment and like my father, I know that my sobriety depends on being involved in this community, and I look forward to strengthening my skills as a sponsor so that I can be of greater service to others.

In addition to AA, I also meet with a mental health counselor on a regular basis. This is the first time I've ever talked to anyone about my family dynamics and personal issues, and it has helped me make sense of my behaviors. One on one counseling has helped me get at the underlying issues that are the root cause of my struggle, and ultimately contributed to my choice to abuse substances. I was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder which I did not know I had, and this helped me to understand one of the reasons why I chose to self-medicate. I plan to stay in therapy for as long as it takes for me to truly heal.

I am also in my third semester of studies in addiction counseling at Portland Community College in pursuit of a Certified Alcohol Drug Counselor degree. My goal is to work at a clinic with people who are struggling with addiction. I am humbled to have the opportunity to learn the tools to help individuals like myself and will do everything in my power to help those struggling with drug addiction. This is just one of the ways I want to make amends to society.

In April I ran my first ever marathon. The training helped me learn more about discipline and structure. In order to maintain my sobriety, I must be vigilant and disciplined, and long distance running helps me strengthen those skills. I plan to continue to challenge myself physically by running more marathons in the future. I've realized that like my father, I can now use the time that sobriety affords me to challenge myself and develop the kind of mental discipline I will need.

Today I have a fiancé, Evelyn, who lives with me and knows the truth about my addiction and my worst mistakes. We've been together for two and a half years and plan to get married and start a family. Evelyn has never used drugs and was not aware that I was using when we first met because I hid it from her, like many addicts do, and only learned about it the day I was arrested. I am grateful that she made the decision to give me one more chance. Evelyn, like me, is dedicated to personal growth. She devotes her time to her work at a local nonprofit. She has helped me learn that you can take your lived experience, even the most painful kind, and use it in a powerful way to help others.

In addition to all the tools I have gained to support my sobriety I have also learned from my experience with my shoulder injury and Oxcontin, that I am vulnerable to relapse with prescription drugs. In order to ensure this does not happen again, I have disclosed my addiction issues to all of my doctors and will continue to do this in the future.

I harmed many people by my actions. I harmed everyone to whom I mailed fentanyl. I harmed my son. These facts will always be part of his story. I owe it to my son to stay sober for the rest of my life, one day at a time. I must never use opioids or any other self-prescribed mood-changer again. I must imitate my father's lifelong commitment to sobriety and responsibility.

I will serve my sentence peacefully and with honor. I will use that time to reflect on my actions and come to terms with my feelings of shame. The Twelve Steps offer me a way to heal my heart by telling the whole truth. I never have to return to the hell of harm and addiction again. My redemption will only follow a dramatic transformation of my thinking.

At age 34, I am still a very young man. Although I have seriously damaged my name, I have decades ahead to devote myself to sobriety and service. On my worst days, I remember that I am not just a name. I am a living human being with a future. I have a loving heart and a strong determination to turn my life around. I can put my story into the service of others. This painful moment gives me a lifelong opportunity to help others who struggle with addiction.

With the countless blessings I received from the United States of America, I had an even greater responsibility to follow the law. I understand my conduct was criminal. It is deeply offensive to distribute fentanyl. I am responsible for my actions and must pay the price. My eyes are open and I am ready to face the long journey ahead.

As you consider the right punishment in this case, please have mercy on me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph Caruso". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Joseph Caruso